

Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America

A STATEMENT OF ITS PLAN, PURPOSE AND WORK

Historical Sketch

The Federal Council held its first meeting at Philadelphia in 1908 and was largely the culmination of previous voluntary, federative movements, the chief of which had been the Evangelical Alliance and the National Federation of Churches and Christian Workers. The important preliminary work leading up to the organization was accomplished by the Interchurch Conference on Federation held in Carnegie Hall, New York City, in 1905, a body composed of official delegates from thirty denominations convened through the initiative of the National Federation of Churches and Christian Workers. This conference adopted the Constitution of the Federal Council and transmitted it to the various denominations with the understanding that approval by two-thirds of them would give it full effect. This approval was secured early in 1908.

The difference between the Federal Council and the previous movements is that it is not an individual or voluntary agency, or simply an interdenominational fellowship, but is an officially and ecclesiastically constituted body.

It is differentiated from other general movements for the manifestation of Christian Unity in the fact that it is the co-operation of the various denominations for service rather than an attempt to unite them upon definitions of theology and polity.

Constituency

Its constituent bodies are as follows:

- The Baptist Churches, North
- The National Baptist Convention (colored)
- The Free Baptist Churches
- The Christian Church
- The Congregational Churches
- The Disciples of Christ
- The Friends
- The German Evangelical Synod

The Evangelical Association
 The Evangelical Lutheran Church, General Synod
 The Mennonite Church
 The Methodist Episcopal Church
 The Methodist Episcopal Church, South
 The African M. E. Church
 The African M. E. Zion Church
 The Colored M. E. Church in America
 The Methodist Protestant Church
 The Moravian Church
 The Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A.
 The Presbyterian Church in the U. S. (South)
 The Protestant Episcopal Church (Commissions on Christian Unity and Social Service)
 The Reformed Church in America
 The Reformed Church in U. S.
 The Reformed Episcopal Church
 The Reformed Presbyterian Church, General Synod
 The Seventh Day Baptist Church
 The United Brethren Church
 The United Evangelical Church
 The United Presbyterian Church
 The Welsh Presbyterian Church

It does not interfere with the autonomy of these bodies and its Constitution specifically states that "The Federal Council shall have no authority over the constituent bodies adhering to it; but its province shall be limited to the expression of its counsel and the recommending of a course of action in matters of common interest to the churches, local councils and individual Christians. It has no authority to draw up a common creed or form of government or of worship, or in any way to limit the full autonomy of the Christian bodies adhering to it."

The basis and limitations of its constituency are indicated by the preamble to the Constitution, which reads as follows: "In the providence of God, the time has come when it seems fitting more fully to manifest the essential oneness of the Christian Churches of America, in Jesus Christ as their Divine Lord and Saviour, and to promote the spirit of fellowship, service and co-operation among them."

Organization

The Federal Council meets quadrennially and consists of about four hundred qualified delegates officially elected by the various denominational assemblies or other constituted authorities.

Its Executive Committee consists of about ninety of these delegates and acts for the Council during the Quadrennium between its sessions, holding regular meetings.

The Executive Committee has an Administrative Committee, holding regular monthly meetings, which acts for the Executive Committee between its sessions.

The national office and its executives, under the Administrative Committee, carry on the continuous work of the Council.

The Nature of its Work

The united work undertaken by the Council is indicated by the titles of its Commissions.

These Commissions are as follows: State and Local Federations, Foreign Missions, Home Missions, Christian Education, Social Service, Evangelism, Family Life, Sunday Observance, Temperance, and Peace and Arbitration.

The Commission on the Church and Social Service has been, up to this time, the most effectively organized because its work seemed to offer the larger immediate field for common action. This Commission also has a Committee on the Church and Country Life. The Commissions on Peace and Arbitration and on Evangelism also have offices and executive secretaries.

Other special Commissions, such as the Joint Commission on Theological Seminaries, on Interdenominational Movements and on International Relations, are appointed from time to time to take up special activities calling for action upon the part of the churches.

The Functions of the Council

One of the important results of the work during the first Quadrennium has been the development of a more intimate acquaintance and a better understanding between the great bodies in the Council through working together and through the larger view which each has gained of the other's work by means of this mutual relation. This bond of fellowship has constantly and rapidly become stronger. One of the chief tasks of the Council is that of educating the churches in the interest of united action.

Its general functions require careful development, owing to the wide variety in ecclesiastical polity among its various constituent bodies. It is generally conceded, however, that it should represent and declare the common conscience of the Christian churches upon important questions with regard to which the common consciousness of Christianity is practically unanimous. This is best illustrated by its declarations on the problems of the social order and concerning the moral life of the nation. For example, upon such questions as international peace no concerted action can be taken except by such a comprehensive representative body as the Council.

One of its important functions is the constant creation on the part of the churches of a state of mind which has deepened their sense of fellowship. This it accomplishes by bringing together upon every possible occasion its widely varying elements for consultation and common action. This is illustrated by such a movement as the co-ordination of the religious forces of the nation for work together during the Panama-Pacific Exposition.

The national office of the Council is creating a large body of literature calculated to increase and deepen the sense of fellowship and develop united action upon the part of the churches and to set forth their common obligations.

State and Local Federations

While the Federal Council is constituted solely of the national denominations, it has a co-operative relationship with state and local federations.

The weakness or effectiveness of local federations is determined for the most part by local situations and is largely dependent upon the community sense of unity and fraternity.

The national office by correspondence, literature and secretarial visitation, is continuously engaged in propagating this work. There are now twenty-one State Federations and about one hundred and thirty City and County Federations.

Financial Support

The national office sustains at the present time only one Secretary for its general work, but with the task of reaching so many forces the demand upon its clerical staff is of necessity large.

An Associate Secretary is located at Washington, D. C.

The various denominations are called upon for a small apportionment which, however, even if fully met, would cover less than half the expenses of the national office.

At its recent quadrennial meeting in Chicago the Council instructed the treasurer to seek for the remaining amount from individual subscriptions, and from appropriations in the budgets of individual churches.

Correlation and unification unquestionably mean efficiency and economy. The work which the various denominations are brought to do in common costs very much less than it does when each denomination attempts it independently.

The subscriptions in the main are sought for the national office and the Washington office of the Council itself. The Commission on the Church and Social Service is maintained by a large number of sustaining memberships of small and moderate amounts. This Commission's department of the Church and Country Life is sustained by special appropriation. The Peace and Arbitration Commission is maintained by a special gift for the purpose, and the Commission on Evangelism is responsible for the maintenance of its particular work.

All into whose hands this brief description falls are earnestly requested to acquaint themselves with the Council as the one official and immediately practical expression of the conviction and desire for that co-operation and fellowship in service which are so powerfully influencing the Christian purpose of our time. Full information may be obtained by writing to the Secretary, Rev. Charles S. Macfarland, 612 United Charities Building, 105 East 22d St., New York City, or to the denominational representatives on the Executive Committee.

Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America

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